

Recovery and Restoration of an Order of Theravada Bhikkhunis

[Abstract]

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From the earliest instances of the delivery by the historical Buddha Śākyamuni Gotama of his message of release from Samsāra for the humans in Nirvana, there arose in the minds of the more mature listeners the awareness that the life of higher living or *brahma-cariya* implied therein required total eschewal of household life for its perfection: *Nayidaṃ sukaraṃ agāraṃ ajjhāvasatā ekanta-paripuṇṇaṃ ekanta-parisuddham saṅkha-likhitaṃ brahma-cariyaṃ caritun'ti*. [DN.I. 63]. The earliest Buddhist suttas in the Pali Canon, like the Sāmaññaphala, declare it in no uncertain terms.

In Buddhism, this is the genesis, and that from a human to humans, of the message called the *dharma*. It was no divine revelation. From this resulted the dispensation of the earnest followers who came to be called renunciants or *pabbajitas*, i.e. those who have renounced their household life *in toto* in search of their spiritual goal. In theory, this renunciant life was open to all, irrespective of gender differences. But the position of the woman in Indian society of the day did not permit the full utilization of this religious freedom.

We learn from Buddhist literary sources that the monastic order of the Jains which had already opened their doors to women much earlier, presumably without adequate safeguards, developed serious disasters from within. Sexual attraction, of men and women among the humans towards each other, is deemed nearly the most convulsive of human stimuli. Far too many acts of rustic sexual behavior, within these religious circles, resulting often in pregnancies, became

seriously disturbing events of public chastisement of the day. The position of considering the admission of women into his religious order had to be for the Buddha, more or less, like that of a burnt child who had to dread fire.

The *aṭṭha-garudhammā* or the Eight Weighty Considerations pertaining to the establishment of the Order of Buddhist Nuns has provoked much uncalled for controversy and undue challenge of the Buddha's line of action. The Buddha's spiritual ideal with a very serious Samsaric dimension within it, had to be reckoned with. At the time he set up an order of renunciants for females in Buddhism, it was much more than a mere act of contemporary chimney sweeping for the east or the west, whether for men or for women. The socio-cultural security of the new order, together with the unhindered development of the aspirations of the truly spiritually inclined and oriented membership had to be guaranteed and safeguarded. It had to be made fool-proof, both then and now. In the aesthetically dignified and spiritually exalted world of the east or the west, on this side of the Atlantic or on the other, of the past, present or the future, the order of Buddhist nuns which the Buddha inaugurated, had to be the cynosure of all eyes.

With mutual argument and agreement, if there is going to be any endeavour for the recovery and restoration of an order of nuns in any part of the Theravada Buddhist world, with a reliable guarantee for its honourable continuance within a respected perimeter, co-operation shall always be forthcoming. The role which the male order has to play and the continuous support they would have to always lend is not to be forgotten or underestimated by either party. This has to be adequately appreciated.

Gender

Not a Major Issue in the Self-operative Liberation Process of Buddhism as a Religion

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I wish to talk on the subject of **The true story of the Order of Bhikkhunis in Buddhism** with this special emphasis on gender mainly with a view to throwing some light on what I believe to be misunderstandings and confusions which have resulted from a deliberate refusal to accept some historical realities of early monastic history. The unimaginably devastating conquest of time and space through diverse media now at the disposal of man has acted on the religious and cultural diversities of the world like the atomic blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The effacement and elimination of the past with a view to superimposing new patterns on it are seen to be causing untold havoc.

Two and a half millennia have passed since the appearance of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni Gotama, and the delivery of his message of self-operative transcendental liberation to mankind. In this process, gender as such has never turned out to be a fundamental issue. Gender, i.e. the difference in sexes as male and female, does make a vital difference in the life-process of the entire living world. This seems essentially related to the reproductive process of continuance of species. The two genders are by no means segregated or meant to fight each other. They each play a joint complementary role in their physical and emotional structuring of body and mind to serve this end. Religious theories at times present woman as being secondarily created, after the original self of man. Hence her subordinated role in religion and society.

In the core teachings of Buddhism, the human is presented as having his

beginning through parental genesis or *mātā-puttika-sambhava*, i.e. not through a process of divine creation. Each human, according to Buddhism, has his own quantum of individual and personal consciousness which determines his or her situation in life with regard to further continuance or final termination. It has to be admitted that this alone is the final religious goal of Buddhism, whether one becomes a renunciant for the speedy attainment of one's spiritual goal or continue to remain in the household and run on the normal running gear in life's continuance, with its ups and downs and its miseries and bliss.

My contribution to this Conference will relate mainly to two areas, namely

1. The unchanging historical attitude of Buddhism, i.e. the place of woman in the human community in relation to man and the rest of the living world including the animals.
2. The position of woman as a human, quite apart from her gender, with regard to her own personal life beyond death, a position which a Buddhist, no matter of what breed or brand, has to unwaveringly cherish. The believed-in superior position of man never serving as a prop for her spiritual ascent.
3. As far as Buddhism is concerned, the question of women of the world becoming Bhikkhunis in Buddhism has to come within this frame. Bhikkhunis, as far as our Theravada Buddhist tradition is concerned, cannot in any way ignore or lose sight of the original vision of Buddhist renunciation which underlies basic Buddhist teachings. Some of the activities which the women of the western world would wish to undertake, after adopting the religious role of Bhikkhunis, like feminist rights, may not be permissible within our justifiably conservative Theravada Buddhist thinking.

Two possibilities are seen within this. They are the possibility for women in any part of the world to free themselves of their social obligations like

- a. Being wives or wedded partners, or

- b. Being life-long child-bearing and child-rearing mothers, married or unmarried.

Within reasonably argued human rights, such situations of total renunciation and redemption, should be within the reach of every female in society, the intellectual capacity of either gender as being super-grade academic giants, never being called in question, within the framework of Buddhist thinking. The need, the possibility and reality of this liberation is seen in the Indian society of the Buddha's day, if only one views it without prejudice and resentment. In Buddhist history, the emancipation of such freed women and their glorification, during the days of the Buddha and even thereafter, is seen to be astounding by all standards.

In the history of Theravada Buddhism, the personality of Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta who, centuries after the time of the Buddha, as the daughter of Emperor Asoka, turned out to be a part of the royal missionary entourage to Sri Lanka, stands distinguished and unique by the profundity of her learning and her spiritual pre-eminence. She is supposed to have brought with her from India young erudite nuns who were qualified enough to preach the *dhamma* and the *Vinaya*, travelling all over the island.

As Buddhists of the Theravada tradition we uphold the validity of both these positions that i. women are completely free to renounce their household life on their own choice as liberation seekers, and that ii. they are capable of attaining, through their own endeavor, without the grace of any other from outside, the highest spiritual attainment of Nirvana. Bhikkhuni Soma, a senior nun of the Buddha's day, thundered back at a challenger that being a woman in no way mattered in the attainment of her liberation. 'In what way does my being a woman matter': *itthi-bhāvo no kiṃ kayirā?*

Many instances of defaulting, through the centuries, due to whatever reasons, may be cited. During the early days of Buddhism, however, there was adequate constitutional provision, with a set of 304 rules of varying degrees of

severity for the regulation and correction of their personal conduct, together with 7 rules for the correct management of their collective life which they hold in common with the monks, for the vibrant continuance of these institutions, i.e. a female Order of Bhikkhunis side by side with that of the Bhikkhus.

On the one hand, there was the religious philosophy of Buddhism called the *dharma* which clearly indicated the way the humans, both men and women without any discrimination, had to regulate their down-to-earth lives here for the attainment of the final transcendental goal of Nirvana. This vision provided more than adequate safeguards for the healthy and vigorous growth of the human community in the present life. That was a great deal more than what the U.N. thinks today as fundamental human rights.

Renunciation in Buddhism to enter the ranks as mendicants, male and female, necessarily implies the eschewal of worldly demands of social requirements like gender rights, employment freedom, equal wages, etc. etc. This vitally requires that Buddhist renunciants, both men and men, can make demands only within a limited territory. Global problems of restricted relevance cannot be allowed to force themselves here. "The east is east and the west is west and never the twain shall meet".

As an outcome of the very brief introduction made so far, three positions seem to emerge clearly.

1. According to the spirit of the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni Gotama, all humans, both men and women, at a certain age of maturity, have the freedom to choose to leave their household lives and take to a life of *pabbajjā* or renunciation. This is the freedom available to everyone, irrespective of caste, creed and gender differences, under the spirit of the *Dhamma*. In the subsequent legalized *Vinaya* administration, however, many pre-requisites based on social, cultural and legal considerations, restrict and regulate the admission of laymen and laywomen into the monastic circles.
2. Those primarily admitted to the monastic life as novices of both sexes, i.e.

sāmaṇera and *sāmaṇerī*, are required to live according to patterns of specified moral goodness or *sīla*, the violation of which would result in automatic expulsion from the community. These are ten in number, called *dasa sikkhā-padāni*, part of which are shared with the basic lay ethics of *pañca-sīla* of the lay community. The rest are a grade higher and imply degrees of abstinence well above the lay community like celibacy, reduction of the number of meals taken per day and rejection of personal comforts like super-grade beds and seats, as well as entertainment via music, dancing and personal make-up.

3. It was possible during the Buddha's day for these young female novices, if they qualified themselves, through a period of probation of two years [*dve vassāni*], under six specified conditions [*chasu dhammesu*] as *sikkhamānā* or probationer to apply for senior status of *bhikkhunīs* or *upasampannā* [*sikkhita-sikkham sikkhamānaṃ upasampādetabbaṃ*].

This implied that they would thenceforth be disciplined and governed as members of senior status in the order, liable both for prosecution and punishment, through a body of codified monastic laws governing the lives of the female renunciants of senior status. This is called the Bhikkhuni Pātimokkha and consists of 304 individual rules of discipline or *sikkhā-pada*. All these acts of discipline-maintenance had to be carried out with the assistance and under the jurisdiction of the male Order of Bhikkhu Sangha. This is as things stood in the early days of the Buddhist monastic organization. This is early Buddhist monastic history. This period of probationary training and testing, prior to granting of senior status, did not apply to male novices who had only to complete their age requirement of twenty years.

Today, if women from any part of the world, east or west, choose to renounce their household life and desire to join the Buddhist monastic community for the peace and unencumbered comfort it provides, we visualize many possibilities within it. Once joined, the religio-cultural commitment that devolves

upon the new entrants is that they are required to keep up a degree of moral goodness which is a great deal more than a mere social requirement. Even the very abstemiousness or *nekkhamma* which is self-chosen is to be looked upon as edifying and upgrading. It is a total attitudinal correction for the perfection of which a disciplinary machinery of varying degrees of severity has been carefully introduced. This has to be accepted and lived up to without challenge.

The lay community will, by contrast, soon learn to look upon this group as a balmy component of the human community whom they will sincerely respect and gladly support. The renunciants themselves will gradually sense a growth within themselves and soon submit to voluntarily seeking such growth and seniority within the order. It is the absence of this sense and this feeling of personal growth and uplift and the resulting aridity within oneself which leads to a sense of challenge and revolt for the overthrow and re-structuring of the system. Within the mellow and magnanimous spirit of Buddhism, there can never be the need for such a change.

We feel that with a reasonable degree of clarity we have indicated above why some of the female members of the human community decide to leave behind the sum total of their household life and choose to take to a life of complete renunciation in *pabbajjā*. Thus in Buddhism, even a young renunciant of either sex, *sāmaṇera* or *sāmaṇerī* has to begin life in the new order as one who has totally given up an old pattern and taken to a new one. What one is going to do thereafter and what not, is clearly built into their new stature. This position is further strengthened and consolidated on the receipt of senior status or *upasampadā* which is conferred on the new applicants only after adequate and careful consideration of numerous issues by a competent body of senior members of the male monastic community.

We as Buddhists and students of Buddhism of the Theravada tradition, unquestionably feel that after the acquisition of this position of seniority within the Buddhist monastic community or *Sangha*, that the progressive movement of this new candidate in the religious culture has to be within a specific perimeter. It has

to be the attainment of Nirvana or the final termination of one's Samsaric continuance as soon as possible.

As a further aid to this, it may be argued, that a *bhikkhuni* who is now an *upasampannā* may pursue further her studies of the *dhamma* which accords very well with her primary aspiration of the quest for Nirvana. This position of being well-versed in the *dhamma*, i.e. *bahussutā* is viewed as being beneficial both to the individual and to those others who are fortunate enough to come within her reach. It should always be possible to enable the *upasampannā bhikkhuni* to acquire this learning without her being plunged into the present day secular universities with their very boisterous rags and demonstrations which are seriously damaging to their religious aspirations.

The education of the *bhikkhuni* at the post-*upasampannā* level, with true loyalty to Theravada aspirations has definitely to be transcendently oriented. One has to begin with the study of basic scriptural *dhamma* of one's own creed and the methodology of its own religio-cultural development. A central educational institute with competent teaching staff and their guidance and adequate library facilities must be set up, paying due heed to resources available. At least a period of three years may be spent by every *upasampannā*, serving best her religious and cultural needs. If these nuns are agreeable to, this area of specific educational enrichment could profitably spill over for the benefit of the lay community.

The invariable complement to this should be the facilities provided for *upasampannā bhikkhunis*, under competent supervision of both senior monks and nuns. to make reliable progress in their spiritual development. Facilities for development of meditation practice, for the religio-cultural development of renunciants, both collective and individual, should be considered vitally important. For the efficient running of both these areas, the harnessing of the services of senior nuns as stewardesses would be indispensable. As an indispensable aid for the development of the life of the cloister, the outdoor travel of *upasampannā* nuns should be under strict supervision, with an awareness of

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the special needs.